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Jerome, Lee ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0278-6986> and Lalor, John  
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Corresponding author:

Lee Jerome, Department of Education, Middlesex University, The Burroughs, London, NW4 4BT.

[l.jerome@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:l.jerome@mdx.ac.uk)

## **Revisiting subject knowledge in citizenship education: understanding power and agency**

### **Abstract**

Citizenship educators have not yet developed a satisfactory framework for describing the conceptual knowledge at the heart of their subject and the complex ways in which students develop understanding. By focusing on how young people (10-18 years of age) use the core citizenship concepts of power and agency, this research provides an insight into how students learn. Our analysis of young people's work reveals that many of them are operating with a pre-political or politically naïve understanding of the world which limits their ability to understand power and agency. Some students have gone on to develop a greater sense of their own agency within complex chains of influence, which demonstrates a more nuanced understanding of power and agency, rooted in a more political reading of world. We conclude that our findings may help citizenship teachers to plan more consciously to tackle this area of conceptual understanding.

### **Key words**

Citizenship education, subject knowledge, progression, learning, citizenship teaching

### **Thinking about subject knowledge: what should teachers teach and how do students make progress?**

The literature on 'learning progressions' seeks to establish "descriptions of successively more sophisticated ways of reasoning within a content domain" (Smith et al., 2006). Shepard insists that such research should yield qualitative descriptions of different levels of thinking about specific content, which can then be used by teachers to evaluate students' progress and plan for further teaching and learning (Shepard et al., 2011). Building on Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) review of assessment practices, Shepard (2018) notes that teachers need access to such models of progression in order to ensure feedback is focused on how to improve. This literature on learning progressions illustrates the importance of teachers developing a coherent sense of how their subject (domain) can be conceptually divided; how students might progress in their understanding of these areas of the domain; and how such understanding can be built into planning and teaching. Corcoran et al. (2009) argue that such research is distinctive because it combines conceptual analysis and empirical testing, however, whilst they may be developing a distinctive methodological approach to this task, others have been interested in essentially similar issues. For example, the research on assessment for learning assumes teachers have access to such models of progression when they are urged to share criteria with students (Black et al. 2003), and the literature on threshold concepts is explicitly concerned with domain specific concepts which unlock higher levels of understanding (Land et al., 2008). In relation to school learning, maths and science are commonly the focus of such research projects and Brant et al. (2015) argue that in subjects such as maths the content taught to older

students is inherently more complex, and that this subject accounts for progression in a fairly linear manner, with new content being consolidated and providing the foundation for more complex content. Hadenfeldt et al.'s (2014) work on students' scientific understanding of matter, takes a fairly typical approach to the task and starts by dividing the topic into four areas reflecting the state of knowledge in the field (structure, physical properties, chemical properties and conservation) and then the authors develop models of student progression for each (e.g. from the belief that substances disappear in reactions (level 1, conservation), to the understanding that energy is conserved, using knowledge of bond types and interactions (level 4)).

In social studies where the same questions might arise repeatedly throughout schooling (a 10 year old or an 18 year old might both meaningfully consider the nature of citizens' responsibilities) we expect a qualitatively different answer of older students, what Burn and Durran (2007) call progression as 'expansion' rather than 'addition.' However, Brant et al. argue we lack agreement on how to account for those qualitatively different expectations. They consider generic models, such as Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, as too broad to account for nuanced subject development; but note a variety of approaches to exploring more subject specific accounts, including an analysis of core knowledge, or a focus on characterising the distinctive features of disciplinary thinking (more in line with the traditions discussed above). Whilst Brant et al. consider authors in social studies who have focused on one or other of these approaches, we might simplify their argument to note that there are three related questions that it is useful to bear in mind when addressing this area. First, it would be helpful to clarify the knowledge base of the subject itself, this might involve theoretical arguments about the nature and purpose of citizenship education, but it might also involve the analysis of bodies of expert knowledge. Second, it is useful to construct some models to account for how children might acquire that knowledge, i.e. how they make progress in their own understanding of the essential citizenship concepts. And thirdly, teachers also need some strategies for assessing their students' progress over time, to understand the extent to which they have acquired and can use the knowledge, and therefore to evaluate the success of their own teaching. In the discussion that follows we highlight some of the ways in which teachers and researchers have engaged with these three questions in the broad area of social studies, and highlight the gaps that persist in citizenship education in particular.

In related curriculum areas there have been teacher-led initiatives in the past such as the Humanities Curriculum Project (Stenhouse, 1983), the Word Studies Project (Fisher and Hicks, 1985) and the Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches (CHATA) project (Lee and Ashby, 1987), all identifying the core of the school subject and developing distinctive models of learning. In particular the work of Lee and Ashby helped to develop a common language for defining the nature of subject knowledge in history education, through describing a series of procedural and substantive concepts (Lee, 2005; Ashby, Lee and Shemilt, 2005). Such concepts are typically described as evidential

understanding, historical significance, historical interpretations, chronological understanding, change and continuity, causal reasoning, and empathy (see Harris et al., 2014). The project CHATA team and many others have used these concepts to construct a series of empirical studies exploring how young people understand and engage with them, and thus they have derived a series of models exploring children's understanding. These models have been used to describe progression in the subject, for example in relation to historical empathy, the CHATA team argued that some students tend to project their own reasoning on to others in the past, whilst others rely on stereotypes about people in particular contexts. As they make progress they are able to develop historical empathy, which moves beyond simple human empathy and starts to engage with how the world looked from another's perspective, for example to understand why religious people in Medieval Britain sought cures for their diseases by touching the king (Lee and Shemilt, 2011).

Once this knowledge is established, it can be used as the basis for medium and long term curriculum planning (Counsell, 2003). It has also been used as a framework for differentiating teaching (Haydn, Arthur and Hunt, 2001) and as a tool for posing specific questions in class, to prompt students to think more deeply, or in different ways about a problem (Phillips, 2002). Whilst others have pointed out that this work needs to be enhanced by teachers' own theorising (Counsell, 2000) and by attention to context (Husbands et al, 2003), it has unarguably provided a strong foundation for professional discourse in the subject.

One way in which citizenship researchers have engaged with this agenda has been to start with the third of our questions, and to address the core issue of what constitutes knowledge and progression through a focus on assessment. Such work can focus on easily assessable facts (Eurydice, 2005), but Quigley et al. (1995) argue that assessors need to develop a framework to account for understanding rather than mere factual recall. This can lead to a confusion between describing subject knowledge and prescribing normative ideals, for example, the American National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) programme for Civics suggests that in grade 4, students described as being at the *basic* level "should understand how national holidays and symbols such as the flag... reflect shared American values", whilst to be graded as proficient they "should be able to explain the importance of shared values in American democracy" (Cooper-Loomis and Bourque, 2001: 7-8). Vontz (1997) argues that explaining how the Stars and Stripes reflects the importance of shared values is itself clearly a contentious issue and moves some way beyond knowledge and understanding. This exemplifies Halstead and Pike's (2006) concern that citizenship knowledge can become a vehicle for the transmission of values, and therefore assessment becomes a means for checking the extent to which such transmission has occurred. Subject knowledge in citizenship education can thus become embroiled with the problems associated with moral education more broadly (Beck, 1998). Peck and Sears' (2005) research on children's conceptions of ethnic diversity highlights another flaw with this

approach as they identified a significant gap between the official ‘standards’ defined in the curriculum and the actual conceptions of children. Starting with devising assessment standards is unhelpful then because it may focus on fact retention, rather than conceptual understanding; because attempts to define levels of understanding may import normative standards rather than focusing on conceptual learning; and because these standards may well bear little relationship to the reality of children’s thinking.

Davies (2006: 13) has argued that such inadequate accounts of progression are also evident in the UK where outcomes for different age phases fail to clearly indicate how students’ learning would be qualitatively different over time. Whereas in history and humanities education there has been more work undertaken on what constitutes the conceptual knowledge at the core of teaching and learning, this has been under-developed in citizenship. In an international handbook on citizenship education (Arthur et al, 2008) only three chapters out of 42 address the nature of subject knowledge, two dismiss it as problematic because citizenship is an inter-disciplinary subject (Kennedy, 2008), or because it might tempt teachers away from focusing on values and skills (Ross, 2008), only one attempts a sustained engagement with the problem of subject knowledge (Jerome, 2008). Conceptual knowledge is also relatively marginal in Cogan and Derricott’s international Delphi study, in which they aimed to define citizenship education by consulting with a panel of experts, but their study relegated discussion of concepts to a brief section on ‘other components’ (1998: 156). Crick undertook some early work on the substantive conceptual framework for the subject (1978/2000) as part of his Hansard Project on political literacy (he described concepts related to government, such as power and authority; concepts related to the people, such as freedom and welfare; and mediating concepts describing the relationship between the two, such as law and representation), but this was largely derived from his knowledge of political theory and has not been taken up in empirical research.

Davies (2003) started to replicate the history CHATA model explicitly by setting out to establish procedural concepts for citizenship (he identifies toleration, rationality and participation), but has not pursued this work and it remains more of a suggestion than a fully developed model. Rowe (2005) has undertaken a small piece of empirical work, which replicates to some extent the kind of approach adopted by the CHATA researchers, namely asking children to complete a task and then analysing their answers to describe the ways in which their thinking differed. Rowe’s main conclusion was that more politically literate students were able to draw on a wider range of ‘social and political schemas’ to frame a problem, but he was unable to identify what conceptual development might help, other than a rather general observation that a greater level of ‘societal awareness’ is helpful. Whilst in history education Husbands et al. (2003) were able to argue that researchers had largely moved beyond a Piagetian framework of progression, and towards one less dependent on general stages of development, the kinds of research cited by Rowe in relation to citizenship education still tends to

focus on these general models. Thus those students with less advanced understandings of a political problem are described as being limited to concrete / individual or inter-personal modes of reasoning (Weinrich-Haste, 1984 cited in Rowe, 2005: 108) and those with higher levels of understanding discuss issues in terms of moral principles. Whilst Rowe does not reference it, this clearly reflects the language of Kohlberg's (1984) stages of moral reasoning, which makes this account of citizenship progression largely just a reflection of general stages of child and adolescent development.

We are left with a situation that citizenship education in one form or another is fairly common throughout the world, but that there is relatively little known about what constitutes the core conceptual knowledge at the heart of the subject, and how children build such knowledge. Alternative research has tended to focus instead on gauging students' attitudes towards participation or the extent to which they develop a civic identity (e.g. Johnson, 2017; Mathé, 2017) but this still leaves the knowledge element unexplored, and so this is the starting point for our own research.

### **Research project methodology**

This project was inspired by the work undertaken in the CHATA project in history education, in which the analysis of young people's responses to history problems and tasks was central (Lee et al., 1993). In the CHATA research, students completed tasks and were subsequently interviewed about their work, and this has some similarities to Peck and Sears' (2005) research which investigated 12 year old children's conceptions of ethnic diversity. Their method included use of a variety of stimuli material in focus groups to prompt student responses. As with the CHATA project, Peck and Sears analysed the children's responses to derive a series of categories, what they refer to as constituting the 'outcome space', revealing aspects of students' thinking which were much less sophisticated than those implied in the curriculum guidance. These approaches incorporated two features that were particularly relevant to this project: firstly there was a central role for students' responses to tasks set by the researchers (i.e. methods not focused on experts, teachers or curriculum documents), and secondly it seemed that both sets of tasks bore strong similarities to the kinds of teaching materials that are widely used in the social studies classroom. Starkey et al. (2014) have discussed the ways in which researchers who have experience of teaching in schools may be able to use their teaching skills to generate data within school contexts. They argue that as long as students are fully informed, and the school is in agreement, that lessons can provide opportunities to conduct student-focused data collection which serves a double purpose – to collect data for educational research, and to provide educationally meaningful experiences for the young people. Whilst this raises challenges in terms of how to conceptualise such data, the ethics of such research, and the role of the teacher-researcher, it also offers a pragmatic approach to working with young people in a minimally disruptive way.

Peck and Sears identify their research as using a phenomenographic approach. This takes the students' understanding of the concept being studied as the main focus of the research. Practically this means the researcher has to avoid imposing their own definition of the concept onto the research, so it is important to devise tasks that are not explicitly based on the researchers' own knowledge. Instead the research should seek to define the phenomena from the perspective of the students (Kallioniemi, 2003: 188). Whilst interviews are commonly used to elicit these understandings, in this project we devised a series of accessible tasks to enable students to use the concept of power in a range of contexts, rather than asking them directly for definitions. Bradbeer et al. (2004) have also used methods other than interviews to elicit qualitative data for a phenomenographic study, in their case open ended questionnaires. However, Cousin points out in her commentary that Bradbeer et al. use 'a phenomenographic approach', rather than a 'pure' version of the methodology (Cousin, 2009: 197). Our research is conducted in that spirit – we have focused on the students' use of the concept of power, and therefore take inspiration from the phenomenographic approach, but we have limited our qualitative data to the tasks which were completed in class. This is similar to the research design devised by Rowe (2005) and, like him, we have to acknowledge that this limits our data to what students were able and willing to write down – a much narrower range of evidence than would have been collected through extended focus groups or interviews. That is a limitation on the depth of our data, but does not entirely weaken the data's usefulness. It still serves as an indicator of the working ideas students draw on in the citizenship class and, as we shall see below, there were sufficient differences between responses to indicate variations in how the concept was perceived.

### ***Data collection tasks***

A series of accessible tasks was developed which could be completed by children at the end of primary school (10-11 years of age) and older children (up to 18 years of age). The tasks were designed as a stimulus to enable the participants to demonstrate their understanding of the concept. All the activities were completed in class time (generally during an hour lesson) and each respondent had their own hard copy of the activity pack to complete.

The activity pack consisted of the following tasks:

1. Card-sort to arrange people in school along a line (most – least powerful) and explain your top, middle and bottom choices.
2. Imagine your school has been invited to sell half of the playground or playing fields to a company that wants to build a block of flats on the land.
  - Who do you think should be involved in making the decision?
  - Who would have the most power to influence the decision? Why?
  - Who would have the least power to influence the decision? Why?



3. Imagine this situation was really happening, and a company really did want to buy half the playground or playing fields from your school.

- Do you think you would support this idea?
- What could you do to try to influence the decision?
- Try to think of at least two actions you could undertake that would influence the decision.
- Why do you think each action would be a good idea?

### ***Respondents***

This research was undertaken in Belfast and Dublin, locations which reflected the fact that both researchers had access to school partners working with their universities, and that the research was funded to promote collaboration across the North and South of Ireland. In both countries the curriculum includes some form of citizenship education in secondary school ('Learning for Life and Work' in Northern Ireland, 'Civic, Social and Political Education' in the Republic of Ireland (see Jerome, 2017)). Ethical approval was gained in both universities and each head teacher was briefed on the project and provided institutional consent. Because the activities fell within the normal remit of a citizenship class, the university ethics committees and the headteachers took the view that separate parental consent was not required. Children were asked to complete the tasks in class, as a regular citizenship education activity, but were given the opportunity to withhold their work from the researcher if they did not want to share it. The researchers were present in each class, and co-taught the lessons with the regular class teacher, and so they were able to clarify this distinction between doing the work as classwork, and allowing the researchers to take the work away. In the event, none of the students took the opportunity to opt out of the research by withholding their work.

In each area one primary and one secondary school were recruited to the project, drawing on already established contacts. The only criteria used to filter schools was that they had to undertake some form of citizenship education in the curriculum. The project was very small scale and we were not constructing a sample which claimed to be representative in any way, but we have reported below the significant characteristics of the schools involved. Cousin has described how "phenomenographers are not interested in associating their descriptive categories with the people who provided them.... they treat all the interviews as a single text" (Cousin, 2009: 191), she argues therefore that such research can yield worthwhile research with small samples.

### ***Ireland Participants***

Multi-denominational, co-ed, Primary	16 respondents	11 years of age
Catholic, co-ed, Secondary school	24 respondents	14 years of age

### ***Northern Ireland Participants***

Integrated Primary School	31 respondents	10 years of age
Catholic Girls' Grammar School	17 respondents	14 years of age
	24 respondents	16 years of age
	8 respondents	18 years of age

### ***Strategy for data analysis***

As Loughland et al. (2002) point out, the outcome of such a study is a set of logically related categories, which describe conceptions of the phenomenon. These categories are qualitatively different from one another and are usually reported in order of their level of sophistication, or what Åkerlind (2008: 636) refers to as an increasing breadth of awareness of different aspects of the phenomenon. Through such an approach “phenomenography can be seen to richly describe the object of study through an emphasis on describing the variation in the meaning that is found in the participants’ experience of the phenomenon” (Loughland et al., 2002: 190). The categories are not seen as representing a staged model of progress in general (because the data is collected at a single time for each participant), nor should one assume that every individual falls into one single category, rather these categories serve as a means for communicating the range of conceptions among the students.

Each researcher undertook an initial analysis of their data to identify broad patterns and types of responses evident across their sample. This analysis adopted an inductive process in which researchers read the responses closely with a view to identifying clusters of similar answers or ideas and trying to identify and describe some of the common characteristics of these responses. These initial ideas were compared at the beginning of a meeting convened to complete the analysis. During this meeting each researcher read through the complete set of responses from the other area and, having familiarised themselves with all the student data, the initial analyses were revisited and refined to identify discernible patterns. The categories and descriptions we have produced as a result of this process are designed to capture some the different ways in which students addressed the tasks, and some of the differences evident in the types of answers they provided. As Peck and Sears (2005) point out, the data set is considered as a whole in such analyses, and there is no expectation that a single student’s responses will all fall into a single category. Consequently, we did not code every response retrospectively against the categories we developed, and it is evident that several students’ answers have characteristics that would meet aspects of several categories, so we do not want to suggest that these describe a child’s level of attainment in some measurable or fixed sense. Rather we conceive of these categories as capturing something of the complex ways in which relatively simple tasks can reveal students’ engagement with, and understanding of, power as a core citizenship concept. As such the categories below are intended to function as a heuristic device, to enable teachers and student

teachers to appreciate how one might think about students' understanding of power and thus indicate some of the implications of taking knowledge seriously in citizenship education.

## **Findings**

Having reviewed the students' responses about power there are some preliminary comments we want to make to set the scene for the analysis that follows. The first observation is that by and large the children and young people perceive that, in general, they are relatively powerless in school. However, as the questions became more specific, and students were asked to think about what they could do to influence a decision, it was apparent that they did not feel as powerless as might be suggested by those initial responses. The specific situation (in which students would feel themselves to be stakeholders) enabled students to demonstrate a greater sense of agency than might be suggested by their general answers. They suggested a wide array of strategies and frequently demonstrated their expectation that they could influence the outcome. This observation certainly supports the assertion by Barrett and Buchanan-Barrow (2005: 4) that presenting children with concrete scenarios or stories to respond to can be more productive in terms of generating data about their 'naïve theories' of society than interviewing them.

The second general observation to make is that we were struck by how few references the children and young people made to social media and on-line activism in their discussion of possible action. It is difficult to know whether this reflects the key messages they have picked up from their citizenship teaching to date, or whether this is genuinely a gap in their experience. Either way, in a climate where we often assume we are teaching 'digital natives' (Bennett et al. 2009) it is interesting to note how few of our respondents made the connection between on-line activity and everyday political problems and actions.

The third observation is about another absence, this time an absence of specific knowledge about citizenship and politics. Very few of the responses mentioned any formal processes or institutions outside of the school. The possible involvement of local authorities (Education and Library Boards in the North) was rarely mentioned, only a few vague references were made to politicians, and no-one mentioned planning permission processes. It is perhaps unsurprising that children and young people do not have such specific knowledge, but it is worth reflecting on this absence in the context of citizenship education - certainly all of the secondary students had some form of citizenship education to draw on, and the Further Education (FE) students were studying politics. One of the distinctive features of the new citizenship education, as opposed to the old civics model, is that it focuses on processes, skills and analysis rather than knowledge acquisition. However, there are clearly times when some very specific knowledge is helpful to frame and understand a problem. In this instance, it is difficult to imagine how to organise a meaningful active citizenship campaign without thinking

about how one would use the public planning process as a means to influence decision-makers and make one's views heard. We note this then as challenge for the teacher, to strike the right balance between creative problem solving, and the provision of appropriate knowledge to inform such processes.

A fourth observation relates to the contexts in which we collected the data. Here it is important to remember that the samples were very small, and so we cannot draw any significant conclusions about the differences between Northern Ireland and Ireland. However, it is worth noting that in Ireland builders and developers have been pilloried in public for a number of years in the wake of the economic crash, and therefore our scenario, focusing as it did on property developers, may well have provoked more animosity than it did in the North. This certainly seems to be reflected in the students' responses, which were more likely to be confrontational in the South, for example, strikes and direct action were more commonly suggested here, whilst petitions and letter writing were more common in the responses from the North. As we have already noted, this may reflect the peculiarities of the classes we involved, rather than any deeper attitudinal differences between populations, however, it struck us as we read the responses, and it is useful to bear in mind when considering the responses we discuss below.

In presenting the following analysis we have ordered the categories of response in what we take to be a broadly progressive order, which is to say that we start with the simpler and more basic responses and build towards increasingly sophisticated types of response. As our data does not track the same children over time, we cannot suggest that this series of steps describes individuals' development. Rather we offer it as a way for teachers to think about the different ways in which children may engage with the concept of power and in particular with the idea of citizens' power to undertake action and influence decisions.

### ***Pre-political thinking***

Many of the younger students' responses re-defined the problem of other actors' motivations as simply a lack of knowledge about the situation. This enables them to side-step the political nature of the problem by failing to acknowledge the situation as one in which there is a confrontation between people with different interests (on the one hand the property developers wishing to develop part of the playground, and on the other the children who want to keep their playing space intact). We take conflict to be a defining feature of politics (following Crick, 1962 and Mouffe, 2016) and therefore it is essential that young people recognise conflicting interests in order to frame a situation as political. Typically students responding in this category tended to assume that simply by vocalising their own preferences, this problem could be resolved. This was exemplified in comments such as "surely they can't [proceed with the building] once they know" (Irish, Secondary student) and "ask them nicely

and say I am sorry but you can't" (Northern Irish, Primary student). It follows from this stance that action can be restricted to simply expressing one's view clearly, for example "tell them what we use it for, maybe it will change their minds" (Northern Irish, Primary student).

This kind of response was not only evident in the youngest students' responses, although it was more prevalent there. For some older students, the pre-political nature of their reasoning could sometimes be masked by a superficial veneer of citizenship knowledge, for example one student suggested an organised student occupation of the field, but his reasoning was "to show the builders how good we are (at) sport" (Irish, Secondary student). This clearly assumes that if the builders knew the fields had been put to good use, they would withdraw their attempt to develop the land. Similarly an older student suggested they could "draw up a plan of the school to show the effect of reducing the size of playgrounds" and that this was a good idea because it "would make it clear what the cost of selling really is" (Northern Irish, FE student). Here again the willingness to re-define alternative interests as ignorance prevents the student from developing a genuine political response, even though they are learning to apply some knowledge about forms of protest.

Other responses in this category assume the whole problem can be avoided by some alternative means, for example one student suggested the solution was to "find them a nice piece of land that nobody owns so they don't buy our land" (Northern Irish, Primary student). This acknowledges the developers have different interests, but it is nevertheless pre-political in the sense that it continues to sidestep the conflict of interests.

### ***Vicarious action***

Some students preferred to defer to other, more powerful, actors to represent their interests and take the appropriate action. Such responses typically deferred to the teachers (even though these were not typically identified as having the most power in school), for example, "Talk to the teachers about this, they could help you with stuff" (Northern Irish, Primary student). Some looked to others, such as, "Beg the governor to tell them to go away" (Northern Irish, Primary student). Similar thinking is also evident among some of the older students' responses, for example one argued that students should "write a letter to the Principal / Board of Governors on behalf of pupils" in order to ensure "the senior staff will be alerted to the students' opposition" (Northern Irish, FE student). In some ways this type of response forms the basis for a more sophisticated form of indirect action, but these examples are still essentially pre-political because they tend to assume the mere act of talking or requesting will result in the desired actions or outcomes. Neither the possibility of conflicting interests, nor the distinction between desire and outcome are acknowledged.

In these first two categories it seems that thinking about power is relatively undeveloped. If one refuses to acknowledge conflict, as the responses in our first category do, then to a large extent the problem of power does not arise. If one passes the buck, as do the respondents in our second category, then power is simply something that others have, and we do not. Both categories seem to reflect a failure of empathy, which in turn minimises an appreciation of the role of political processes. In this context, the failure of empathy precludes students from perceiving a genuine conflict of interests, which is a defining feature of observing power at work (Lukes, 2005). This reflects a much broader literature on the development and role of empathy in children and adolescents (see for example Hoffman, 2000) and the specific work on historical empathy by Lee and Shemilt (2011), who found that some students failed to account for others' different perspectives related to context, and simply projected their own understanding and motivation onto historical actors.

### ***Direct actions (politically naïve)***

In the next two categories we place the bulk of responses which seriously explore actions which could be undertaken by individuals and groups to directly influence the outcome. These answers acknowledge the reality of different perceptions of the situation and different motivations, and therefore engage politically with the problem as a clash of interest.

Because of this acknowledgement of conflict, it seemed to us that some of these direct actions were not pre-political, although they were certainly politically naïve. In this category we place some of the responses which drew on children's direct experiences of getting their own way: "Shout and scream;" "Do cutesy eyes;" "I would pretend to cry;" and the ominous "Annoy them till they crack" (Northern Irish, Primary students). There is no doubt that for a ten year old, these direct actions may well be tried and tested methods for overriding a relatively powerless position and securing the desired outcome from adults who ostensibly have more power. These children also exercise a more purposeful agency than we have seen in the first two categories. They know how to achieve change in a direct interpersonal exchange, although they do not draw on any established knowledge about citizenship and politics in order to do so. They are also limited by demonstrating thinking which only makes sense in the context of direct one to one relationships. Unlike parents, building developers can simply walk away!

As with the previous category, there are some parallels here with Lee and Shemilt's (2011) work on historical empathy, where many children are at a stage where they begin to appreciate that others may not see the world as they do, but still tend to draw on stereotypical views of others, rather than recognising the specificity of their position, interests and perceptions. In these examples, adults seem to feature as a rather undifferentiated group, and they can be influenced in similar ways. This reflects Berti's (2005) discussion of children's understanding of politics, which indicates that the end of

primary school is expected to be a turning point where children start to differentiate more clearly between adults with different roles and power, and it is this understanding which opens the possibility of a more sophisticated understanding of politics and political actions.

### ***Direct actions (politically literate)***

Many of the respondents, especially in secondary school, were able to make what we might recognise as more overtly political recommendations for action which are more grounded in an understanding of the context. Some of these represented a more direct form of action to disrupt the plans of others, for example one student suggested, “Chain myself to the fence” (Northern Irish, Primary student), whilst another argued they could “Camp on the fields to block the builders” (Irish, Secondary student). These are building on traditions of direct action, and what distinguishes them from the politically naïve action is that they are indeed likely to have some effect. Blocking access by putting oneself at risk is likely to stop the builders, at least temporarily.

Other types of response that might be classified as politically literate action include petitions and letter writing that move beyond the simple assertion that these will clear up misunderstandings (pre-political thinking) or that others will automatically do as requested (vicarious action). One student proposed writing letters to governors, because “if enough people wrote... in a sense they would have to listen” (Northern Irish, Secondary student). This indicates that students’ power is represented by their numbers, rather than their individual voices, and this reflects a significant advance in understanding power in a democracy. Simply put, whilst a governor may officially have more power than a student, all the students standing together may have more effective power than the governors in a specific situation, despite the power officially invested in their role. This is a basic lesson in politics, as Alinsky (1989: 33) put it in his classic community organizing text, *Rules for Radicals*, “the power of the Have-Nots rests only with their numbers.”

### ***Chains of influence***

Responses in the final category more completely acknowledge that others have their own reasons for pursuing courses of action, therefore one can take action to change another actors’ calculation of the benefits to accrue from their original plan. These responses also reflected the respondents’ understanding that coalition building can be adopted as a deliberate strategy, and that a student’s best line of action to stop developers may not be to directly engage with the developers, but rather to enlist others who have greater power. This is reflected in the following response: “Write a letter to all parents condemning what was happening. Parents... have the ultimate control over their kids, so they could pose a major threat if they are not happy, they could pull their kids from that school” (Northern Irish, FE student). Such reasoning was further exemplified by the student who suggested “I could ask my parents to formally complain to the board of governors. The governors need pupils at the school

so if people were threatening to pull their children out of school they would listen” (Northern Irish, Secondary student).

These forms of coalition building are more sophisticated than those in our second category because they start to unpick the mechanism through which such chains of influence work. This is even more evident in some of the alternative proposals, one of which suggested the following: “Protest – start petitions, rallies and public outcry... that would gain media attention. Negative media attention could affect the school’s image negatively and may cause them to cancel the decision so as not to harm it further. Also it would encourage others who are not connected to school to protest and there is power in numbers” (Northern Irish, FE student). Similarly another student suggested they could “Complain to governors and threaten to strike... there would be a lot of negative attention from the media and this would be bad for the board and the school reputation and so the governors do not want this to happen” (Northern Irish, Secondary student). These responses demonstrate an even more sophisticated understanding of what we refer to as chains of influence. This can be demonstrated by laying out the indirect chain of influence proposed in these answers:

- Identify the powerful decision-makers.
- Identify the key interests of those decision-makers.
- Identify a factor that would affect those key interests.
- Identify an action that would affect this factor in your favour.
- Identify a realistic student action to achieve this.

This final category builds on models of politics which acknowledge the importance of coalition building, and also mirrors the *Theory of Change* model of campaigning which involves considering how each action results in an outcome that builds a chain of outcomes that ultimately leads to a desired campaign goal (Lamb, 2011: 5-21).

### **Concluding comments**

Having outlined the broad categories of response, we turn in this final section to consider some of the implications of our project. First, we note that these categories indicate that the quality of a student’s understanding of power, their own agency, and the potential of political action is reflected in their rationale for an action rather than the sophistication of a proposed action in itself. Students at every level suggested petitions, for example, but the extent to which they understood how and why they might be appropriate varied greatly. On this reading we want to suggest that a knowledge of how and why one would use a petition reveals students’ level of citizenship understanding, whereas the mere knowledge that petitions exist is of limited use. The point for teachers is to consider scaffolding classwork so that students move beyond suggesting simplistic and superficial prescriptions for citizens’ action and explain precisely how a proposed action might lead to a desired outcome. This



might involve focusing more explicitly on models such as the ‘theory of change’ within campaigning organisations (Lamb, 2011), in which campaigners force themselves to develop clear statements of their desired goals, the resources required, an analysis of the situation and account of how social change is expected to happen, and a map to link actions in a logical sequence to secure the desired goal. Using such explicit models might be helpful to focus on the political reasoning required to account for citizens’ agency.

Secondly, we have noted that there is no clear cut distinction between the age of students and the sophistication of their response. Whilst in broad terms one might expect older students to have developed a deeper understanding of citizenship concepts (Berti, 2005), it is also the case that many older students continued to offer answers which, whilst more extended and better written, essentially avoided the political nature of conflict or simply passed the buck to other more ‘powerful’ people. Similarly, some of the younger students hinted at a more sophisticated understanding of why an action might be useful. This reflects the findings of the project CHATA researchers in history education, that there was a ‘7 year gap’ which meant that many younger students demonstrated fairly advanced levels of conceptual understanding in some areas, whilst many older students did not (Ashby et al., 2005). This underscores the need for teachers to elicit and analyse the reasoning of students in their classes, because better literacy levels may mask a relatively undeveloped sense of political literacy.

Thirdly, although students did not refer to such knowledge explicitly, some of their responses implicitly drew on knowledge of the different bases or forms of power. Some of our respondents noted that power could derive from (i) one’s role in an organisation (bureaucratic power), (ii) from an individual’s qualities (charismatic power), (iii) through control of resources (economic power), or (iv) through a number of people coming together (democratic power). These sources of power reflect the distinctions made by theorists, for example, Weber distinguishes between traditional, charismatic or legal sources of legitimation for the exercise of power; Marx focuses on the control of capital (Giddens, 1971); and campaigning organisations tend to focus on the final category – people power (<http://organizingforpower.org>). Understanding the various bases of power enabled students to suggest and explain a richer range of strategies which explored extended chains of influence and coalition building. These strategies also enabled students to start to think about influencing people in this particular context, rather than simply asserting generic one size fits all types of response (such as asking, telling, or cajoling someone to do what you want; or having a vote because it is fair). We would suggest therefore that teachers might usefully integrate such conceptual distinctions in their teaching to provide students with knowledge which may enable them to develop deeper conceptual understanding of power and agency, and thus to develop their understanding of what would constitute an effective plan of action. Our discussion of the less sophisticated levels of understanding also indicates that it may be particularly useful to spend time considering the motivations, perceptions and

interests of different actors within any case studies being used in class, as many of our participants' responses lacked this level of empathetic understanding.

The research project set out to explore how young people engage with and understand power as a core concept in citizenship education. Whilst we are careful to describe the levels we have outlined as a heuristic device, we believe this is useful because it offers teachers an example of how they can plan to deepen conceptual development, and how they might approach the task of providing diagnostic feedback to students. As Shepard concludes from her analysis of the literature on learning progressions, developing some working theories about what progression might look like can help teachers to develop formative assessment interventions which are qualitative (not centred on test scores) and responsive to the particulars of a student's thinking (Shepard, 2018: 171). While we have arranged the categories into levels of increasing complexity, and thus imply some form of hierarchy, we also recognise that in some regards these simply represent different aspects of thinking about power. The challenge for the teacher is to understand the characteristics of a student's thinking and to help them extend their understanding by prompting them to consider alternative or additional perspectives. We feel therefore that this provisional analysis from a small sample yields a useful starting point for citizenship educators, and suggests this is a fruitful area for further exploration, both in terms of broadening out the range of concepts explored, and in developing more sophisticated research strategies to capture students' thinking beyond their short written responses to tasks.

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